Corbett, E.A. ?

LIFE AND WORK OF LORD STRATHCONA

The subject of this sketch was born at Forres on August 6th, 1820. The name "Forres" comes from two Gaelic words "far uis" meaning "near the water". It is one of the most beautifully situated towns in Scotland. Lord Strathcona was fond of comparing it with Montreal. Forres is situated on the shore of the Moray Firth with the Grampian Mountains rising in the near distance behind. Consequently in location it somewhat resembles Montreal, and the significant coincidence is that the Patron Saint of Forres is "St. Lawrence". The whole country round is full of ~~with~~ suggestions from literature and history. Nearby is the heath where Macbeth met the "weird sisters". Visitors to Forres are still shown the site of Macbeth's castle. The numerous mountain streams in the neighborhood are noted for their beautiful scenery, and teem with the finest of salmon. During the recent war, Canadian Forestry Companies lucky enough to be posted in this district, had delightful surroundings in which to spend any leisure hours which came their way.

Lord Strathcona's father was one "Alexander Smith" who was descended from the Gows and Smiths of the parish of Knockando. Alexander Smith is described as "volatile, fond of song and a convivial glass, a cheerful companion, but with few of those stable qualities needed to make his way in the world." After attempts at farming and soldiering he set up as a merchant at Grantown on Spey near Grant Castle, the headquarters of the Grant clan by whom all the country round is settled. He married Barbara Stewart - on her mother's side, a Grant. One of her brothers, John Stewart" was the famous fur-trader, who accompanied Simon Fraser on his voyage down the Fraser River in 1808. He was associated with the Astor Fur Company and also the Northwest Fur Company. Some of his later years of service were spent as chief factor in the Lesser Slave Lake district. Stewart Lake in British Columbia is named after him. Another brother, Robert Stewart, also a fur-trader, was drowned in an heroic attempt to rescue companions in Columbia River.

Barbara Stewart, Lord Strathcona's mother, is described as "a comely women, of strong quiet character, and simple piety." Lord Strathcona often reverted to the lessons she had taught him - lessons of gentleness, patience and conduct. "Her voice was low, and she disliked loud noises. She was not nervous, but if a door slammed or a heavy object fell, she closed her eyes with a smile as of suppressed pain. She set great store by courtesy and good manners, and our bonnets were always off in her presence. She insisted on unscrupulous cleanliness in house, person, and apparel, and herself set an example of perfect neatness in dress."

Lord Strathcona had a brother who served with distinction as an Army Medical Officer in India. His elder sister, Margaret, was a great favorite with him, and had a great influence over him. She died at the age of 27, and in later years her worthy and distinguished brother founded Royal Victoria College for women at Montreal in memory of her. This we know from his own statement to his brother "You are quite right in thinking that in the matter of this college, the memory of our sister Margaret was in my mind..You will remember her gifts and her ambition to become a scholar." Such was the parentage and such are the other members of Donald Smith's family.

Donald Smith was educated at the Anderson Institute at Forres, distinguishing himself at Latin and Mathematics. He left school at about sixteen and began the study of law, but the return of his fur-trading uncle fired his imagination and he decided that Canada would be his field of conquest. Leaving home, he walked from Forres to Aberdeen from which port he sailed to London, where he conferred with his uncle who had previously assured him that he would, if necessary, use his interests to secure young Smith a post with the Hudson Bay Company which by that time had amalgamated with the Northwest Fur Company. An amusing incident is recorded of Donald Smith's later and more prosperous days. A certain man called at his office in London and assured him that he was the man who had given him a ride on the way from Forres to Aberdeen. This man departed with a generous gift, but after he had returned several times, Lord Strathcona advised his Secretary that he was too busy to see him; at the same time volunteering the information that the man's story of having given him a lift on the road was a pure fabrication in as much as he had walked every foot of the way.

Donald Smith sailed for Canada on the Royal William, a clipper ship of 1000 tons. Nearly fifty days were consumed in the voyage. He arrived in Canada when Papineau's rebellion of 1838 was in full swing. He was much upset by the terrible immigration conditions which he saw along the St. Lawrence River. Poverty, filth, hunger and disease were rife among the newly arrived immigrants, and much to his surprise in spite of the scarcity of population there seemed to be actually a condition of unemployment prevailing. Feeling that his chances at the time were poor in either Quebec or Ontario, he decided to try his luck with the Hudson Bay Company. He had an introduction from his uncle to Sir George Simpson, at that time Governor of the Hudson Bay Company and known as "The King of the Fur Trade" and the "Emperor of the Plains". Simpson was a very notable character who contributed a great deal to the exploration and collection of accurate knowledge of the Great West.

He is described as combining with the prepossessing manners of a gentleman all the craft and sublety of an intriguing courtier; while his cold and callous heart was incapable of sympathising with the woes and pains of his fellow-men. George Simpson was a profound admirer of Napoleon and tried to imitate him. He had cultivated to a fine degree the art of subduing junior employees. "The surveillance of the Company over the youths entering its service was very exact, the qualificationa demanded were high, and the conditions stringent". Donald Smith started to work at the remuneration of £20 per annum, and was put to the task of counting furs. Knowing no better, he went to work in his bare hands and suffered considerably from sores as a consequence. During his early time with the Company, conditions were much disturbed as a result of the rebellion, and in his correspondence there are repeated references to the possibility of his being called out to serve in the militia. At this time George Simpson's headquarters were at Lachine. From here Donald Smith was sent to Tadousac, thought to be the oldest white settlement in Canada. He spent six years at Hudson Bay posts in the Saguenay country. The time spent in this country made a profound impression upon him. Later on, commenting on the famous picture "The Island of Death", he said "that, apart from the trees, is exactly like the Saguenay! It recalls my young days as a fur-trader."

The first recorded trade made by young Smith on his own account was for a magnificant black fox skin which he bought from a trapper named Dugas who had fallen out with the Hudson Bay Company and planned to take his furs direct to Montreal. Young Smith visited his camp and ingratiated himself personally so that he was able finally to make the trade, securing the pelt for £8. With much trepidation he reported the result to his chief, and after a careful examination of the fur he received this commendation: "Eh, well, you didn't do so badly - for a youngster, not so badly. It's worth double that."

At about this time in young Smith's history he reports an amusing story of an incident which he witnessed. At this time many of the high chiefs in the fur trade were from old Highland Scotch families. He was present on one occasion where one of these men named Macnab, head of the clan and known as "The Macnab" gave a banquet to George Simpson and a number of fur traders including a Mackenzie, Mactavish, MacGillivray and a Macdonald. Simpson sat at one end of the table and Mackenzie at the other. Said MacPherson ""Macnab, why are ye no at the heid o' your ain table", whereupon the Macnab replied "Mr. MacPherson, I'd hae ye ken weel that where The Macnab sits, there is the heid o' the table!"

After his apprenticeship in the Saguenay country, Donald Smith was sent to the Labrador. It was characteristic of Simpson's autocratic rule that when young Smith left his post, fearing snow blindness, to go to Montreal for treatment, Simpson gave him just one-half hour to be on his way for the new post in the Labrador. Feeling very sore but devoted to a sense of duty he obeyed. A friend later on asked him "why did you not tell him to go to hell and take the Hudson Bay Company with him". Lord Strathcona replied: "I felt like doing that, but on thinking it over concluded that if Sir George Simpson could bring himself to give such an order, I can bring myself to obey it." Twenty long years he spent in the Labrador - first as a junior clerk and later as chief trader and representative of the Company. During these lonely years, he had a fine opportunity for reading and self culture, which he seems to have used to the utmost, familiarizing himself with many of the classics, both ancient and modern. It was while serving here that he met his wife, Miss Isabella Hardisty, who shared his joys and sorrows for over sixty years. They had one daughter through whom the title descended. It seems to have been one of Lord Strathcona's regrets that he never had a son to carry on the name. He was very superstitious, the Highland strain coming to the surface in this respect. He believed in second sight, and the story is told that dreaming of the illness and death of his favorite sister Margaret months before he had any definite information, he assured his companions that Margaret was dead. Later despatches confirmed his premonition. That his Labrador post was no sinecure, the following extract from Dr. Grenfell will show:

> "The life of a Hudson's Bay factor in Labrador" wrote Dr. W.T. Grenfell, a man who succeeded in making that country his own in a manner comparable only to Donald Smith's association with the peninsula", does not offer all the joys of civilisation, but it offers a field to develop courage, muscle, resourcefulness and self-reliance to an eminent degree. It makes men who shoot straight, fear nothing, and live hard. It offers the simple life, with its many advantages, and it breeds hospitality, a brotherliness to one's kind, a readiness to stand by anyone in distress, that, in our complex life in cities and even villages, we rarely find ourselves called on to exercise. Never has a visitor travelled our coast but his heart has gone out equally to all the brave men of these two great organisations, the Moravian Missions and the Hudson's Bay Company."

In spite of drawbacks of climate and soil, Donald Smith developed a farm on the Labrador, which was the delight of all beholders. He grew turnips, peas,

cucumbers, potatoes, pumpkins, melons, barley, oats, and many other things, much of it under glass. As a consequence, the Company's employees were better fed and healthier than they had ever been before. To such an extent did his farming enterprise triumph over the natural environment that one is reminded of a quotation from an American author of the florid type who said, in speaking of his hero "if Providence had sent him to the North Pole, he would have found a means of generating heat from polar magnetism, dissolved a canal between the glaciers to carry to the Esquimaux market cabbages grown in the fructifying heat of the aurora borealis".

Donald Smith's frugality is shown by the fact that during this period he saved for investment one-half of his meagre salary. His time seems to have been well spent in studying the character of the people by whom he was surrounded, some of them very quaint and interesting. The following quotation from the remarks of the Esquimaux wife of one Williams, an Englishman, will illustrate this point:

> "She, the help-meet, is so in the strictest sense of the word. She cures the codfish for market and for family consumption, manufactures sealskin boots and garments, tends the salmon nets, "sculps" the seals and prepares the oil for burning, feeds the dogs, etc.,etc., besides performing her domestic and maternal duties. When driven by household cares, little vexations often occur to ruffle her temper, and then her shrill voice screams constantly as she works: "Webuck-tam dog-ouk, ouk - clear out, I tell you! Susan! Wat be doon? Where's the dish-cloth? No, that beant he, blockhead. Mercy, who ever say the flies and nippers so bad as they! You, there, shet that door - shet it. Hist! abide still, child - knock off, I tell ye, or I'll fix that bawling. Peruik! now, who's had finger in that pot? Oh my!"

The conclusion of Donald Smith's term in the Labrador was coincident with the opening of negotiations for the transfer of the Northwest properties to the Canadian government. After lengthy negotiations a bargain was struck, the terms being that for a cash indemnity of £300,000, the reservation to the Company of its trading posts, and one-twentieth of the arable land south of the North Saskatchewan River, the property would be transferred to the government of Canada indirectly through the Imperial government. Unfortunately care was not taken to consult the settlers already in the territory, particularly in what is known as the Red River Settlement where several thousand hardy pioneers - Scotch, French, and Swiss with a sprinkling of Canadians and Americans

had established themselves. Surveyors were sent in and began running lines in all directions. The half-breeds particularly became excited when no assurances were forthcoming. Colonel Dennis, who was in charge of the surveyors, repeatedly warned the Canadian government, but the answer he received was "proceed with the surveying on the plan proposed". There were three parties at Fort Garry - a Canadian party, under the leadership of one Dr. Schultz, who were anxious for the immediate transfer to Canada; an American party who wished annexation to the United States, and a Republican party who wished to set up an independent republic. From this division of interests, a confusion worse confounded resulted. Louis Riel, a half-breed who had been partially educated for the Priesthood but who seems to have been an ill-balanced character, was successful in establishing what is known as a provisional government. Through the winter of 1869-70 he maintained a precarious hold of power; at different times imprisoning considerable numbers of the loyal settlers, and in one case at least being responsible for what can only be described as a cold-blooded murder in the execution of Thomas Scott. Wm. MaDougall, formerly Minister of Public Works in the Dominion Government, was appointed Governor in the new territory. He proceeded via St. Paul and Pembina to take charge of his new office. He was met on the Canadian boundary at Pembina by an armed force of half-half-breeds, and forbidden to enter Manitoba. After spending some time here in humiliating parleys carried on at long range, McDougall finally returned disappointed and humiliated to confess his failure, and so passed out of political prominence.

There is a great deal of confusion, and there are many conflicting accounts of the incidents concerning the so-called Red River Rebellion of 1869-70. Joseph Howe, then Secretary of State for the Provinces, visited the Red River in an official capacity, but appears to have accomplished little or nothing, and indeed seems to have played rather an unworthy part. Howe, on his way out, met McDougall, and the latter says "Howe knew that he had done me a ill turn and was ashamed to meet me". The whole situation was complicated further by the fact that there was bitter controversy in progress between the "wintering partners" of the Hudson Bay Company and theHudson Bay Council over their rights under the new management. The Company seems to have treated its employees at this time rather shabbily. They were consequently not at all keen to facilitate the transfer, and throughout played a neutral part. The Governor MacTavish at Fort Garry may have been jealous, but in any event, he was a dying man and from his bed of sickness could do little to influence the course of events. Donald Smith, who had been made a sort of business manager for the Hudson

Bay Company, was sent to the Red River, both in his capacity as Hudson Bay officer and as a Commissioner of the Canadian government. The testimony of all is that Donald Smith did the best work of any one who visited the Red River. He was instrumental in saving the life of Capt. Boulton, sentenced to be shot on account of a rising of Portage La Prairie men against the provisional government. He did his best to save the life of Thomas Scott, but was not successful. John A. Macdonald was never very enthusiastic, possibly because he realized that the government had horribly mismanaged the whole business. The verdict of history will probably be that the greatest value in John A. Macdonald's work was in the handling of the Red River situation.

Immediately following the settlement of the Red River troubles, Donald Smith was called to Washington to assist John A. Macdonald and the Imperial Commissioner in the Alabama claims and fisheries disputes. He seems to have rendered invaluable service however judging from the testimony of all concerned. In this, as in several other incidents of Canadian history, Canadian interests appear to have been sacrificed to Imperial interests. There was really no excuse for taking the matters in question and the San Juan Island dispute to the Alabama negotiations.

Following this service Donald Smith went to London to represent the "wintering partners" and secured a settlement with which they were satisfied, but with which he was not. Even at that date, Donald Smith saw that the most valuable interest of the Hudson Bay Company in Western Canada was its land grant. The "wintering partners" holding the general view of the old fur-traders, regarded land with contempt, and deliberately sacrificed their interest in it. Throughout all these negotiations Donald Smith was resolute in upholding the necessity of a close bond between Canada, both East and West, and the British Empire. Again there is a great deal of dispute as to the real danger of annexation of Western Canada. That such a proceeding was regarded as practicable at the time is illustrated by the following extracts from two newspapers - one "The New Nation" published at Winnipeg in 1870, and the other from "The New York Sun" at about that date.

The New Nation

"That Red River, the keystone of the confederacy projected by England, will never go under the authority of the Dominion, is now apparent. The keystone having given away, the rest of the fabric will speedily topple; and in its place, we repeat, will be upreared an unbroken, undivided Empire, such as nature seems to have prepared the way for on this continent."

"New York Sun":
"The tendency of events of this North-American continent is plainly towards the consolidation of all the people dwelling upon it into one great nation, around the present United States as a mucleus. From the Polar Sea to the Isthmus of Darien there will be in time but one government and one national power. Canada, Rupert's Land, Victoria, Mexico will have but one flag, and eventually Cuba and her sister islands will join us. Thus united, we can defy the world and offer a boundless asylum to the oppressed of every clime and country. Who among us can say that ours is not a glorious destiny, or reflect without exultation that he is an American citizen?"

We are further advised, on what seems good authority, that Louis Riel had the offer of one-half million dollars in support of an annexation movement, which offer he declined. The whole situation was made very difficult by the prevailing attitude of the old-country statesmen at that time. Sir Stafford Northcote, Governor of the Hudson Bay Company and special commissioner to Washington said ""Canadians fancied that England would gladly be rid of them; and what with fishery quarrels and their own divisions, they are certainly rather a luxurious ornament of the Empire".

Following the rebellion and Riel's banishment to the United States, a Fenian raid on a small scale was staged at Pembina. "General" O'Neill and 35 men attempted to invade Canada on October 5th, 1871. They were disarmed by the American soldiers at Pembina under the command of one Col. Wheaton. Governor Archibald of Manitoba, who had meanwhile been appointed, became panicky and called on Louis Riel to call out the half-breeds. There is an impression that he was promised an amnesty for past offences on condition of loyal service at this time. In the correspondence on the point at the period, there is a good deal of doubt. One is forced to the impression that throughout this entire proceeding, Sir John A. Macdonald, to quote a familiar expression, "passed the buck" and evaded direct responsibility. Finally the Red River troubles were settled and Western Canada started on its development.

Donald Smith was now elected a member of the Manitoba legislature and of the Dominion house, and played a very active part in the negotiations for the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Following the defeat of the McKenzie government in 1868, it will be remembered that its policy of building the Canadian Pacific Railway as a government road was abandoned in favor of inducing some company to undertake the task. Various companies of capitalists made offers. One which the government proposed to accept was by a group who proposed to build the road for a subsidy of ~~of~~ 50,000,000 acres of land and $30,000,000 in cash. Those were the days when railway companies stuck at nothing in securing their ends, and there seems conclusive evidence

that a large contribution was made to the campaign funds of the government with the understanding that the charter would go to this group. . The story leaked out and a bitter debate took place in the house. As a result Donald Smith, elected a government supporter, threw a bomb into the discussion by abandoning the government. Sir John A. Macdonald resigned and the Liberals were returned to power. They attempted to build a road as a government undertaking, and did build a large part of it , but Alex. McKenzie's government was defeated in 1878 on the issue of the"national policy"soecalled. John A. Macdonald now triumphantly returned to power, took up the task of building the railway. Donald Smith and others felt at this time that a private company could not possibly carry on the undertaking on account of the desperate financial conditions, making the float of bonds exceedingly difficult. He and J.J. Hill and others had reorganized the St. Paul - Minneapolis and Manitoba Railway Company, later known as the Great Northern, and this Company was pushing a line up into Manitoba. However, at length the present Canadian Pacific Railway Company was formed,on terms that are household knowledge in Canada, and carried through the undertaking. One of the great difficulties was to secure a man with sufficient energy and ability to carry through the construction work. This person was found in William Van Horne who was highly recommended by J.J. Hill, one of the railway wizards of the United States, in these terms: "There was no one on the whole continent who would have served their purpose so well as Mr. Van Horne". He had brains, skill, experience and energy, and was besides a born leader of men.

The story of the C.P.R. is told elsewhere, and we shall not repeat it here.

Taking up the story of Lord Strathcona; on the reorganization of the Conservative Government in 1896 he was offered and refused the leadership of the Conservative party. On the defeat of that government he went to London as Canadian High Commissioner in April 24th, 1896, and filled that position with distinction until the time of his death. The office of Canadian High Commissioner was created in 1880, and had been filled by two persons previous to Donald Smith - Sir Alex. Gault and Sir Chas. Tupper. The responsibilities of the office were a general supervision of immigration and finance. Throughout his entire term of office, Lord Strathcona consistently advocated a closer trade relation within the Empire

and the strengthening by legitimate means of the Imperial bond. He went up and down throughout the length of Great Britain telling the story of Canada, and seeking to direct the flow of British iemigration toward Canada. In his later years he accumulated a great fortune, probably greater than any other Canadian as ever amassed, and no other Canadian certainly has ever approached his generosity in spending. Gifts aggregating millions of dollars were made to friends, the Royal Victoria Hospital at Montreal, the Royal Victoria College for Women, Strathcona Hall, a men's residence at McGill University, and in the foundation of the Strathcona Draft fund of $250,000 to provide an annual income of $10,000 to encourage physical and elementary military training in schools throughout Canada. Donald Smith, or Lord Strathcona, as he is sometimes called, was a firm believer in the truth of the statement that the first duty of a free citizen is to be prepared to defend his country. At the outbreak of the South African War he, from the first, believed in direct participation on the part of Canada and was an enthusiastic supporter of the project to send a Canadian contingent. Moreover as the war dragged along and its peculiar character became evident he had raised and equipped at his own cost of more than one million dollars a mounted force of scouts known as "Strathcona Horse" which went to South Africa under the command of the late General Sam Steele, and rendered distinguished service. On their return home, they stopped at London; were reviewed by Kind Edward, and had decorations and colors presented. Finally, just in time to avoid seeing the world catastrophe - the great war - on January 21st, 1914 at the ripe of age of 93 years - predeceased by his wife who died ten months earlier at the age of 89,- Lord Strathcona who had been made a peer of the Realm in recognition of his distinguished service, died, mourned by all classes as one of the greatest figures of the British Empire. There have been few who possessed his benevolent spirit and catholicity of interest. Throughout his whole life he was devoted to the cause of education; at the time of his death, being Chancellor both of McGill University and Aberdeen University, to both of which he had contributed notable gifts.

Mention has already been made of one or two of his personal qualities. He was noted for his hospitality. The story is told of one occasion when his house was full that he actually sat up all night in order that beds might be provided for all his guests. Hes benevolence has already been mentioned. Even in the pioneer city of Edmonton, we have one illustration of it in the gift of $25,000 toward what

is now known as the University Hospital, formerly known as Strathcona Hospital. He was an intensely religious man, a loyal son of the church of Scotland but very tolerant in his views and a friend alike to Roman Catholic and to Protestant. His industry was proverbial. The offices of the Canadian government in London were known as the light-house on account of the long hours Lord Strathcona insisted on putting in at his desk, even in his later years. The brave human spirit of the man and his kindness of judgment is shown in the text he has given of success which is "To make fewest mistakes is the criterion of success."